
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF
COMMERCE

NEWS

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20230

NATIONAL
OCEANIC AND
ATMOSPHERIC
ADMINISTRATION

CONTACT: Patricia Viets, NOAA
(301) 457-5005

NOAA 02-014
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
February 1, 2002

NOAA SATELLITES HELP RESCUE 166 PEOPLE IN U.S. IN 2001

Thanks to environmental satellites with rescue tracking capability, the Commerce Department's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the Russian government saved 166 lives in the U.S. waters and wilderness in 2001.

The NOAA satellites are part of an international Search and Rescue Satellite-Aided Tracking Program known as Cospas-Sarsat. The system uses a constellation of satellites in geostationary and polar orbits to detect and locate emergency beacons on vessels and aircraft in distress.

Of the 166 rescues last year, 112 people were saved on the seas; 39 in the Alaska wilderness, and 15 on downed aircraft in states around the country. A variety of rescues took place on the seas. Engine fires, flooding, rough seas and water spouts all caused emergencies resulting in distress calls and rescues. In Alaska, stranded hunters and lost persons were among those rescued. Downed aircraft incidents included those making emergency landings and those that crashed in bad weather.

"Our business is saving lives," said Ajay Mehta, manager of NOAA's Sarsat program. "We are an international humanitarian program whose goals and rewards are saving lives. More than 13,000 lives have been saved worldwide since the system became operational in 1982 and more than 4,500 in the United States alone. September of this year marks the 20th anniversary of the first Sarsat rescue."

NOAA's National Environmental Satellite, Data, and Information Service operates the U.S. Mission Control Center in Suitland, Md., and represents the United States in this program by providing satellites and ground equipment.

- more -

“We had an unusual rescue last year with a bear circling a private plane that had crashed in Alaska with two people on board,” said Mehta. “These folks were in a dangerous predicament. Yet, because there was an emergency locator transmitter on board the aircraft that activated upon impact, rescue authorities were able to respond to the distress quickly. On arrival the search and rescue aircraft saw the situation unfolding and dispatched a helicopter to retrieve the occupants and bring them to safety.

“NOAA expects the number of worldwide rescues for 2001 will total about 1,100-1,200. Numbers will be available this spring, as countries around the world report their rescues to the international Cospas-Sarsat organization. “The average number of distress alerts continues to rise internationally as more countries sign on to use the advantages and benefits of the Cospas-Sarsat system,” said Mehta.

NOAA’s Geostationary Operational Environmental Satellites (GOES) can instantly detect emergency signals. The polar-orbiting satellites in the system detect emergency signals as they circle the Earth from pole to pole. Emergency signals are sent to the U.S. Mission Control Center in Suitland, Md., then automatically sent to rescue forces around the world. Today there are 35 countries participating in the system.

NOAA’s National Environmental Satellite, Data, and Information Service (NOAA Satellite and Data Service) is the nation’s primary source of operational space-based meteorological and climate data. In addition to search and rescue, NOAA’s environmental satellites are used for weather forecasting, climate monitoring, and other environmental applications such as volcanic eruptions, ozone monitoring, sea surface temperature measurements, and wild fire detection. NOAA Satellite and Data Service also operates three data centers, which house global data bases in climatology, oceanography, solid earth geophysics, marine geology and geophysics, solar-terrestrial physics, and paleoclimatology.

For more on NESDIS, visit: <http://www.nesdis.noaa.gov>

Learn more about NOAA’s role in the Cospas-Sarsat program:
<http://www.sarsat.noaa.gov>

Note to Editors and Producers: To arrange a media visit the U.S. Mission Control Center in Suitland, Md., call Pat Viets at (301) 457-5005.